

The Tyranny of Work: Employability and the Neo-Liberal Assault on Education

Capitalism in the Classroom: Neoliberalism, Education, and Progressive Alternatives

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Perhaps no society in history has delivered so little to so many relative to the promises it makes about personal freedom as liberal-capitalist democracy. Young people are told that liberal-capitalist democracies distribute opportunities equally, that they reward initiative and new thinking, that in them anyone can become anything that they want to be, that all citizens are free to express themselves, to posit their own goals in life, to decide who they will befriend and who they will love free of tradition, familial authority, or imposed morality, and their future is open to free self-realization as unique individuals. While it is true that liberal-capitalist democracies do not typically *legally* oppress individual or group differences, and have learned how to combine economic and cultural dynamism with social structural stability, for most individuals, life is not a carefree journey of self-realizing individuation, but struggle within and against material necessity and deep structures of social exclusion. Self-expression is largely confined to variations on approved routines of working and consuming, with the former the material condition of participation in the latter. In order to reproduce itself free of as much conflict as possible, these opposed values—the hedonism of the mall and the asceticism of the office-- must be internalized as both necessary and good by a majority of citizens.

Schools are essential to this internalization process. If they are to fulfill their system function of helping to ensure conflict-free social reproduction they must produce graduates who

believe that they can be anything they want to be *and at the same time* willing to accept whatever employment opportunities labour markets make available. This already contradictory process is made more difficult by the fact that complex modern societies require workers with basic literacy and numeracy skills and the ability to think independently so as to successfully negotiate change. In preparing students for life in an economically dynamic society, the school system must enable its graduates to gather and evaluate information, to distinguish between cause and effect, theory and practice, intention and outcome, true and false. Once developed, the use of these basic intellectual capacities cannot be easily managed, by the schools or social power more generally, because they are the foundation of intellectual independence. Intellectually independent people know how to compare claims with evidence and to distinguish appearance and reality. People who can distinguish appearance and reality are potential threats to social reproduction in contexts where they come to have reason and evidence to believe social appearances (equal opportunity and free individuality) are masking a quite different reality (class, sex, gender, ethnic, race, and ability-based inequality and coercive social power).

Given the fact that schools cannot inculcate the ruling value system without helping to develop the capacities required to criticise it as ideological, they have been a source of anxiety to the ruling class almost from the moment that schooling became compulsory. (Sears, 2033, pp. 31-56). The neo-liberal reforms our paper will analyse and criticise are the latest in a longer history of reforms all of which seek to re-adjust the school system to the changing system-needs of a dynamic liberal-capitalist democratic society. At the same time, this *schooling* function of the schools depends upon its maintaining, and in some respects deepening, its genuine *educating* function, no matter how much neo-liberal reformers would like to do away with it. The fact that schools serve this contradictory function makes them essentially important institutions in the

struggle against neo-liberal attack, not only because the intellectual independence required to question and criticise is developed through education, but also because the practice of education itself pre-figures forms of intrinsically satisfying and life-valuable forms of non-alienated labour that capitalist labour markets cannot, for the most part, provide. Were people to derive primary satisfaction from the experience of non-alienated labour, the ability of capitalism to reproduce itself would be seriously compromised.

Our argument will be developed in three steps. In the first, we will distinguish schooling from education. In the second, we will examine the recent history of neo-liberal school reforms, primarily with Ontario as our example, and with attention to its effects in the secondary school and the university systems. “Employability” is the connective thread linking the reform agenda in these otherwise dissimilar institutions. We will demonstrate how the employability agenda is fatal to any educational value the institutions might have, and the reasons why it is essential for opponents of neo-liberalism to defend the integrity of schools as educational institutions, however rightly critical they might be of them as regards their disciplinary and social-reproductive function. In the concluding section we will discuss a joint project we undertook in an adult secondary school as a paradigm case of education as intellectually liberatory, non-alienated work.

## **I: Schooling and Educating**

Our argument proceeds from a distinction between schooling and education. Schooling is an institutionalised process by which new generations are socialised in the interests of conflict-free social reproduction. This socialization process involves the inculcation of basic forms of self-discipline (learning to conform one’s demands to the established structure of rules in the

various public and private spaces that constitute society), the development of deferential attitudes towards authorities of all forms, the cultivation of basic inter-personal skills needed to get along more or less peacefully with others, and the acquisition of basic intellectual skills required for productive functioning in social and economic life. Above all else, however, the schooling process transmits the ruling value system of the society it serves to younger generations. As Erich Fromm argues, the social function of schools is to “qualify the individual to function in the role he is to play later on in society ... to mold his character in such a way that ... his desires coincide with the necessities of his social order.”(Fromm, 1969, p. 284) The ruling value system of any society justifies the prevailing structure of power and wealth and the rewards and sanctions it makes available and imposes as supremely good, the only sound and sane basis for the formation of individual goals and life plans. To the extent that young people internalise the ruling value system, they bend their efforts to finding a place within the existing structure of power, challenging it only in terms of its failure to provide in practice what is promised in theory, but never in terms of its overall coherence or the substance of the values it affirms. In other words, internalization of the ruling value system precludes fundamental social criticism, because it impedes the imagination in exploring different possibilities of social life-organization and the intellect from discovering the structural contradictions that stand in the way of realizing imagined alternatives.

Schooling thus tends to disable the emergence of free imagination and critical intellect. Its function is to prepare young people to accept the given social world, its rewards, its institutions, as given realities to which individual aspirations and goals must be adjusted. The processes through which the given world comes to be given, the roads not taken and the roads that could be taken, are hidden from view. Schooling impedes the development of individual

and collective agency, preparing young people for an alienated life by alienating them from the freedom implicit in their latent imaginative and intellectual powers. Ivan Illich explains this “pre-alienating” effect of schooling clearly. “Young people,” he writes, “are pre-alienated by schools that isolate them while they pretend to be both producers and consumers of their own knowledge, which is conceived of as a commodity put on the market in school. School makes alienation preparatory for life, thus depriving education of reality and life of activity. School prepares for the alienating institutionalization of life by teaching the need to be taught. Once this lesson is learned, people ... close themselves off to the surprises life offers when it is not predetermined by institutional deformation.”(Illich, p. 46). Of all the alienating effects school produces, none is more damaging to the formation of individual and collective agency than the belief that paid work is a nature-imposed necessity service to which the overwhelming majority of the young person’s efforts must be bent. Once that idea has been instilled, fear of compromising one’s marketability to potential employers suffices to prevent the formation of ideas for fundamental social changes, changes which would not abolish work, but only work as alienating self-commodification and subservience, to labour markets in general, and specific employers in particular.

Nevertheless, while we agree with Illich’s critique of schooling, and while we believe that education can and should be pursued outside the walls of school institutions, we do not agree completely with his “de-schooling agenda.”<sup>1</sup> Schools, in our view, are contradictory institutions because they cannot pursue their socially reproductive function without at the same time

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<sup>1</sup> Both authors have been involved, individually and together, with a variety of popular education initiatives and projects. Popular education allows for freedom from institutional formalities, bureaucratic administration, and government interference, but also faces challenges reaching wide numbers of people. The authors conclude that the struggle for education against schooling needs to be pursued both outside and inside the institutional walls.

functioning as shelters from the very social forces whose demands students are being prepared to accept. One cannot prepare students for life in the contemporary world without cultivating in them basic literacy and numeracy skills, without enabling them to distinguish causes from effects, without developing in them basic communication skills and the ability to negotiate diverse and unfamiliar environments, and without discussing values like freedom, equality, democracy, and human rights. Even if the later values are defined operationally in terms of the norms of liberal-capitalist democracies, and even if all the basic intellectual skills listed above are taught in the most narrow and instrumental manner, once they have been developed, they cannot be controlled by external authorities. If one can read, one can read anything readable; once one can perform basic math operations, one can apply them beyond the narrow range of examples used to teach them, once one can talk and communicate with others, one can discover other perspectives and goals, and once one learns the meaning of democracy and other basic political values, one can begin to ask whether its current instantiation is adequate to the idea. These basic intellectual capacities, therefore, are the basis of the educational mission of schools, a mission opposed in essence to the schooling function.

Education is the process whereby the cognitive and imaginative capacities of human beings are developed beyond their given range and depth capacities free from subservience to the ruling value system for the sake of enabling comprehensive understanding of what there is to be known. Education thus enables the free development of cognitive and imaginative capacities: “free from” programmed service to ruling value systems and free to think for oneself in continually expanding scope and critical depth of understanding. Once education has drawn out the latent imaginative and cognitive capacities of the human brain the subsequent development of those capacities can no longer in principle be programmed by institutional authority, because

to become educated mean to become aware of the freedom of thought in relation to its object. What we mean can be illustrated by unpacking the implications of the colloquial phrase, “I’ll think it over.” Rather than just accede to whatever request has been made, the person transforms the request from an external demand to an object of thought to be considered in various dimensions and weighed against other considerations. The person who thinks something over does not simply do what he or she has been told to do; rather, he or she explores the reasons behind the request and the reasons for compliance or refusal, and can explain either once his or her thinking has concluded. This capacity presupposes understanding of the language in which the request has been made, the ability to weigh consequences, the capacity to judge the request against a life-value standard, and the ability to understand the effects of compliance on the natural and social worlds of which one is a dependent and interdependent member. These are generic capacities, but they have potentially profound social and political implications—by unhinging their thought from service to imposed system-requirements, education frees people mindless subservience to social power.

Any genuine educational process thus results in the student ceasing to think of herself as the object of power and coming to think of herself as the subject of her own life. That conversion, however, leads to politically unpredictable results, and politically unpredictable results threaten conflict-free social reproduction. Hence, school reformers are always in search of ways to eliminate education in favour of schooling. Neo-liberal educational reforms, to which we now turn, must be understood in this political-pedagogical context.

## **II: Neo-Liberal Schooling and the Tyranny of Work**

The historical origins of neo-liberalism tell us much of relevance about the content and goals of its educational reform agenda. Neo-liberalism is not a social form but a set of prescriptions for managing capitalism that first began to take shape in the early 1970's as a response to the "stagflation" then hampering economic performance. The cause of the crisis was attributed to the failure of labour markets to adequately discipline labour and control its costs. Unions were judged too strong, welfare state support for the unemployed too generous, and public services and state enterprises too inefficient. Attacking all three became central to the neo-liberal project. Referring to its first systematic elaboration in Thatcher's England, Harvey lists its core goals as "confronting trade union power, attacking all forms of social solidarity that hindered competitive flexibility, the privatization of public enterprises, reducing taxes, encouraging entrepreneurial initiative, and creating a favourable business climate." (Harvey, 2005, p.23). The intended effect of this package of reforms was to make individual workers more dependent upon market forces and thus more willing to accept terms of employment (lower wages, less benefits, less control over the nature and pace of work) favourable to the owners. As Albo, Gindin, and Panitch argue, neo-liberal changes to labour laws, combined with the material pressure exerted by public and private austerity, have "compelled workers to become more dependent on the market as individuals so as to limit their ability to contest the social relations of the capitalist market as a class." (Albo, Gindin, Panitch, 20 p.90) Neo-liberal educational reforms, at the secondary and post-secondary level, extend these goals into school institutions, eliminating, as far as possible their educational role in favour of schooling students for insertion into this new social reality. There are external and internal drivers of this agenda.

Externally, financial pressure and market forces are used to squeeze institutions so as to encourage or force compliance with the internal transformations necessary. For example, the Harris government, elected in 1995 and the first Ontario government to pursue an openly neo-liberal agenda, slashed the education budget by \$400 million (MacLellan, 2009, p.60). This was in keeping with Harris' promise to reduce government spending, part of his so-called "Common Sense Revolution," of lower taxes, less government regulation of business, and anti-union legislation. (Harvey, 2007; Maclellan, 2009; Pinto, 2012). In the Canadian university sector, public funding as a proportion of operating revenue has been going down and tuition going up.(CAUT almanac) In order to meet higher tuition costs more and more students must borrow to finance their education.(Canadian Federation of Students, 2013). The deep debt they find themselves in gives them an understandable interest in securing higher paying employment that they would be able to find without university education, which facilitates their internalization of the neo-liberal identification of the purpose of schools with producing products (future workers) for labour markets. In the Canadian university sector, public funding as a proportion of operating revenue has been going down and tuition going up.(Canadian Association of University Teachers, 2012). In order to meet higher tuition costs more and more students must borrow to finance their education.(Reference on student debt) The deep debt they find themselves in gives them an understandable interest in securing higher paying employment that they would be able to find without university education, which facilitates their internalization of the neo-liberal identification of the purpose of schools with producing products (future workers) for labour markets. As Deem et. al. argue, underlying the neo-liberal reform agenda is a cultivated distrust of public sector workers, including teachers and professors, to do their job unless they are subjected to the coercive managerial style and "quasi-market competition and

managed consumer choice.”(Deem et.al., 2007, p. 24) The life-value of public institutions—to meet human life-requirements for the sake of enabling life-capacities without depleting the natural and social sources of the life-capital this work requires—is attacked as profligate and unsustainable.(McMurtry, 2013, pp.

The internal changes produced by the external changes to funding regimes are more insidious, but more dangerous for that reason. If successful, a generation’s expectations about the meaning and value of education will have been re-shaped to include only the instrumental contribution it makes to their becoming alienated workers and consumers. Gradually, the constituency for whom preserving, extending, and deepening the educational function of schools is politically important will shrink, making resistance, recovery, and movement building for alternatives more difficult. That political goal is itself essential to the neo-liberal agenda. Its aim is not of course to abolish schools, or even public resources to support them, but to radically transform people’s expectations about the place and purpose of public institutions and the value of the work that defines them. That which Slaughter and Rhoades argue of the American shift towards “academic capitalism” expresses a truth that is generalizable to other nations and other levels of education: “Academic capitalism” does not involve “privatization, rather it entails a redefinition of public space and of appropriate activity in that space. The configuration of state resources has changed, providing colleges and universities with fewer unrestricted public revenues and encouraging them to seek out and generate alternative sources of revenue.”(Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004, p. 306). The new private revenue sources schools and universities are forced to seek come at the price of conformity to labour and commodity market demands. Instead of educating people capable of thinking for themselves, schools produce compliant employees happy to have whatever job is made available. Let us now examine the

details of the effects neo-liberal school reform has had on Ontario secondary schools and universities.

## Iia: The Neo-liberal agenda and Ontario's Elementary and Secondary Schools

The swift and sweeping reforms of the early years of the Harris government were made possible by the highly charged and politicized environment in the province after the 1995 election, sparked by education minister John Snobelen's now famous leaked comment that, in order to legitimate massive change, a crisis in education had to be created (MacLellan, 2009; Pinto, 2012, Sears, 2003). Asserting that the education system in Ontario was "broken," and citing as proof gaps between technological advancements and skills taught in high schools, as well as social and cultural changes not reflected in schools, the education minister succeeded in making the case with the public that deep changes in educational policy and practice were needed (Sears, 2003). Ironically, the "Common Sense" reforms, premised on the neoliberal credo of less government, were accompanied by more government interference in schools. The general effect of these attacks were "reconstituted school governance, standardized and centralized testing, massive curricular reform, strict systems of accountability, and the intrusion of market goals into public schooling" (MacLellan, 2009, p. 66).

A case in point is the 1998 Science and Technology curriculum for elementary students, which saw the inclusion of skills described as important for the workplace. These skills are often learned by rote and are easily tested, thus having the effect of standardizing the curriculum and exerting tighter control over the work of teachers, making teachers "accountable" to government rather than students' life-requirement for education. (MacLellan, 2009; McNay, 2000). Under Mike Harris, the neoliberal promise of less government took the form of less government funding but more coercive government interference with the ability of schools to educate.

Standardized testing and content-based curricula made the Harris government one of the most intrusive in Ontario history (Pinto, 2012).

Curriculum reform in the service of employability, appealing as it may seem to parents and students, ultimately masks a political function. As Sears points out, the “agenda for education reform seeks to reorient schooling so that the individual develops a self in relation to the market rather than the state” (Sears, 2003, p. 11). In other words, the curriculum reform of the 1990s encouraged individual ownership of the type of knowledge that would secure the student a place in the labour market as both a worker and consumer, but does not speak to the student’s role in a democracy, for example, or the responsibilities of citizenship, or the intrinsic life-value of inspiring wonder in the minds of children, or nurturing curiosity and an attitude of inquiry, or cultivating interest in areas of study that have no practical applicability (McNay, 2000).

We are aware, of course that public schools have always reproduced the social order (Apple, 1990; Chomsky, 2000; Gintis & Bowles, 1973; Giroux, 1994; Willis, 1998). However, the private ownership of knowledge emphasized by the education reforms undertaken by the Harris government and other neo-liberal dogmatists is an attempt to negate completely the educational side of the school institution contradiction. A content-based, highly standardized curriculum frames students as “lone wolves,” motivated not by the goal of understanding their societies as problematic, contradictory dynamic systems which can be changed through collective action, but fixed realities to which they must conform. The danger of the “lone wolf” approach to schooling is that education will be perceived not as a place to examine the greater questions of citizenship, democracy, social justice, or the common good, leaving the excesses of

neoliberal capitalism unquestioned. Instead, education is reduced to schooling which is in turn treated as “the key to the meal ticket of the nation: its economy” (Bouchard, 2006, p. 165).

While the Liberal government elected after Harris’ departure from office in 2002 reinstated much of the funding cuts of the Harris government, investing \$18.3 billion in 2007-2008, (an increase of 24% since 2003), they did nothing substantial to reverse the assault on the educational element of schools. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>). Standardized testing continues in Grades 3, 6, 9, and 10, administered through the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) (mirrored at the post-secondary level by the Higher Education Quality Assurance Council (HEQAC), and the employability of students remains an educational objective as outlined in the Ministry document *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools* (2010). Arguing that developing the “learning skills and work habits needed to succeed in school and in life begins early in a child’s schooling,” and that these work habits and learning skills may be “strengthened through the achievement of the curriculum expectations” of Grades 1 through 12 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 12), the document goes on to provide a list of employability skills as defined by the Conference Board of Canada, (a leading business supporting think-tank). These skills focus on “personal management skills that facilitate growth.... and teamwork skills that enhance productivity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 12). Sample behaviours include, among others, being responsible and adaptable, and being able to work in teams while participating in projects or tasks. A more complex list of competencies as outlined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is also cited in the Ministry document as necessary for student success. This list is prefaced with an acknowledgement of the complex demands of living in a globalized and

modern economy, the need to make sense of rapidly changing technologies, as well as the need to make decisions that represent collective challenges: for example, “the need to balance economic growth with environmental sustainability and prosperity with social equity” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 13).

The sample behaviours associated with these skills are organized into three “categories of competency,” namely “Using Tools Interactively,” “Interacting in Heterogeneous Groups,” and “Acting Autonomously” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 13). The subordination of education to schooling for the sake of employability might seem to be contradicted by the inclusion of the ability “to defend and assert rights, limits, interests, and needs” in the document. (OECD, cited in Ministry of Education, p. 13). However, despite appearances, this invocation of rights, limits, interests, and needs has nothing to do with developing the capacity of students to identify ways in which existing structures and value systems impeded their satisfaction, but is confined exclusively to asserting one’s rights within the limits established by the ruling value system. The defense and assertion of rights and interests is framed as an the acts of lone individuals, not a collective political subject capable of defending the gains made by past generations of groups in struggle for inclusive, democratic, and life-valuable public institutions. Rather, the overwhelming thrust in towards skills that make people employable.

As further evidence, consider the Ontario Skills Passport (OSP), a website that identifies skills the Ministry of Education regards as “critically important” (p. 12) to student success. It emphasises exploitable work habits as educational objectives, including the following: “working safely, teamwork, reliability, organization, working independently, initiative, self-advocacy, customer service, and entrepreneurship” (p. 12). The OSP website describes these skills as the “Essential Skills that enable people to perform tasks required by their occupation and other

activities of their daily life” (Ministry of Education, 2014, <http://www.skills.edu.gov.on.ca>).

Workplace preparedness continues to be the dominant function of schooling in post-Harris neoliberal Ontario.

This emphasis is repeated in the adult education sector of the secondary school system. Unschooling adults who became injured or unemployed and who looked to the public school system for an opportunity to earn a high school diploma did not fare well under the Harris reforms. According to the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation (OSSTF), the Harris government cut funding to adult day schools by 70%; as a result, 85% of the student population disappeared between 1995 and 1997, with a net loss of 70,957 students between 1994 and 2001 (OSSTF, 2014, <http://www.osstf.on.ca>). Many of these people, particularly injured workers, were sent to private business colleges to earn questionable diplomas quickly (Social Policy in Ontario, 2010, [www.http://spon.ca](http://www.spon.ca)). Although this practice has been stopped, adult education in Ontario remains in need of a “home,” in the words of Kathleen Wynne, then-Parliamentary Assistant to the Minister of Education (Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 1). In the case of secondary education, courses taught in an adult high school use the same curriculum guidelines as those taught in any other high school, despite the great differences in age and life-experience between adult and adolescent learners. In the case of adult education, then, the curriculum that reproduces the neoliberal values is being imposed on the very people – unemployed and injured workers – whose lives have been most painfully disrupted by neoliberalism.

#### IIb: Neo-liberalism and the University

When we turn our attention from secondary schools to universities, changes in the internal governance and administration take on a significance they do not have in the secondary schools. Given the fact that universities traditionally have greater autonomy from government

policy than secondary schools, and thus have had greater latitude for the cultivation of socially critical dispositions and capacities, aligning university education with neo-liberal objectives requires governance changes that compromise institutional autonomy and academic freedom. One can learn a great deal about the goals of neo-liberal reform by examining changes in the administrations that are expected to impose them. The first noticeable change in administration is its growing size. Noam Chomsky, speaking to a group of unionized adjunct faculty in Pittsburgh described the process: “In the past 30 to 40 years there has been a very sharp increase in the proportion of administrators to faculty and students ... [who are] very highly paid. This includes professional administrators like deans ... who used to be faculty members that took a couple of years off and then go back to faculty; now they’re mostly professional, who then have to hire sub-deans, secretaries, etc.) (Chomsky, 2014, p.2). More important that the growing size of the administration, however is the way in which the professionalization Chomsky notes increasingly alienates it and its guiding value system from the faculty (as teachers and researchers) and students as learners. As senior administrators becomes more professionalized and more highly paid, they begin to change their sense of mission, from providing academic leadership to managing finances and promoting institutional growth (in student numbers, in the value of research grants and other income, in the architectural footprint of the institution). One mid-level administrator interviewed by a research team in the UK studying the effects of “New Managerialism” in the university system describes the change she felt in herself: “Very often when I go to work I have to pinch myself and say ‘Look, I’m sure I originally was an academic, but gosh now I feel like an accountant, I spend all my time ... talking about issues about money. ... the academics and the quasi-managers are at logger heads with the real, full-time managers who have a different career structure and a different career path.”(Deem et. al., 2007, p.179).

These changes to the structure of management are not driven solely by forces endogenous to the university, but have been encouraged by government policies that openly challenge the capacity of universities to govern themselves according to their founding mission—the creation and dissemination of knowledge in the public good. Universities have been mostly compliant with these demands, rushing to undertake costly, time wasting, and contesting program reviews to prove to governments that they understand that “times have changed” and that “universities must change along with them. The recently announced “Differentiation Strategy” for Ontario universities and colleges forces every University and College in the province to submit a “Strategic Mandate Agreement” detailing the ways in which the institution is aligning its objectives and strengths with government objectives. The report asserts that “differentiation strengthens alignment between regional development needs and defined institutional mandates. This will advance innovative partnerships and programs that serve the distinct Ontario communities to which institutions are connected, as well as broader provincial needs. This alignment will ensure that students graduate with skills that respond to local and provincial labour market needs and contribute to social development. In areas that align with institutional capacity, these partnerships may be global in scope.”(Government of Ontario, 2013, p. 10). The real implications are clear: only those programs and institutions which can demonstrate a commitment to these objectives can be assured of future funding. The overall objective is to contain costs by eliminating duplication in the system, forcing universities to specialise on narrow bands of expertise in contradiction to the very nature of a *university*. The Differentiation Policy follows directly from the 2011 Commission on the Reform of Ontario’s Public Services (the Drummond Report) which explicitly recommended “differentiation” as a means of using resources efficiently and “encouraging and rewarding quality” as a means of ensuring

compliance with government imposed-objectives.(Commission on the Reform of Ontario's Public Services, 2012, Ch.7).

In order to tie the goals of schooling more tightly to labour market demand, the traditional rights of professors must also be challenged. The attack on academic labour takes a number of forms. Tenure track positions are on the decline or, as in England since 1988, no longer available. In the United States in 2007 the percentage of tenured and tenure-track professors had declined to 31, while precarious part time academic labour had increased to 50.3.(Wilson, 2010, p.1) As in the private sector, employees without job security are more easily managed. By subjecting faculty to the discipline of academic labour markets, in which supply always far exceeds demand, their willingness and ability to develop in their students the capacity to understand and critique the social forces driving neo-liberal reforms (threatening the student's future as well) is undermined.

Along with the growth of an academic precariat there are also changes to the type of work offered. There are increasing trends towards the separation of research and teaching, often justified by the claim that there is no correlation between excellent research and excellent teaching, but really driven by the demand that academic labour become more productive.<sup>2</sup> A recently published report supported by the HEQCO urged a doubling of teaching loads for "non-research productive" faculty members, a move which the authors estimated would be the equivalent of hiring 1 500 new full time faculty.(Jonker and Hicks, 2014). As with other attempts to measure academic productivity-- an American proposal tries to measure it through the ratio of credentials awarded to students enrolled"-- this measure of productivity does not and

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<sup>2</sup> Paper in my office, the metaanalysis

cannot measure what, if anything, graduating students have actually learned.<sup>3</sup> If one judged university performance solely bases like the number of graduates per unit cost, productivity could be increased if schools simply started selling degrees to more students at the same or lower costs.

*Reductio ad absurdum*'s aside, the increasing pressure on academics to be more productive, to graduate more students with the same or smaller faculty complement, increases workloads, which in turn forces changes to pedagogical practices, especially the evaluation of student work. However, rather than see less time with students as a threat to quality, administrations, abetted by governments, and egged on by business, seek technological means to increase enrollments still further. The push for on-line learning, including Massive On-line Open Classrooms in which thousands of students around the world are potentially enrolled, cannot be understood simply as technical-pedagogical innovations, but only as part of the overall pattern of neo-liberal restructuring of the universities. As Aaron Bady argued recently, The MOOC revolution, if it comes, will not be the result of a groundswell of dissatisfaction felicitously finding a technology that naturally solves problems, nor some version of the market's invisible hand. It's a tsunami powered by the interested speculation of interested parties in a particular industry. MOOCs are, and will be, big business, and the way that their makers see profitability at the end of the tunnel is what gives them their particular shape."(Bady, 2013). As with all other neo-liberal reforms, the rhetoric of expanding access and better meeting students' needs papers over the reality of turning educational institutions into more efficient producers of profit for private business.

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<sup>3</sup> The OCUFA paper on productivity

Every proposed change, from centralizing control over the university in senior administrative hands to raising enrolments through on-line courses is justified the same way: better preparing students for the real world of tough competition. As Alan Sears has recently argued, “Ultimately, the goal of this transformation is a university system that, along with certain skills and knowledge, teaches students: “You are entitled to nothing. You have no right to anything you cannot afford, and you will only be able to afford things through a life of constant hustle.” In other words, students are being prepared for a life in which their personal freedom is reduced to forced self-reinvention at the behest of labour market demand. Free choice of life-project remains as a justifying slogan, but is excoriated as irrational if it is exercised to choose courses of study for which there is no market demand. In the neo-liberal universe interest and enjoyment count for nothing; life is about making rational investments in oneself, the good of life is maximizing returns on investments. A recent study of the employment outcomes of Canadian university graduates by the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce makes this point clear: “Another important driver of the relatively low return on education is field of study. For students shelling out thousands in higher-learning costs, a university degree can be viewed as an investment with upfront expenses, and a stream of future benefits.” As with the metric of productivity discussed above, the CIBC study does not touch on any value save the money-value of education. And although it purports to concern itself with graduates’ income, its real concern—since it is studying labour in a capitalist economy- is how much money-value employees create (wages and salaries track labour productivity, such that one can be paid more only if one is producing more for the firm).

Thus we arrive at the real truth of neo-liberal educational reforms at the secondary and post-secondary level—their new mandate is to produce productive and compliant workers that

will produce more money-value for appropriation by the appropriating class, *at the expense* of understanding the real dynamics and contradictions of this process and their capacity to change it. The real target of these reforms is not any particular subject or discipline, but the space that education requires and, if successful, widens, between the system-need for compliant workers and the human life-requirement for non-alienated work and relationship. To conclude, we will examine how education itself is an example of non-alienated work, and thus itself a momentary liberation from the coercive objectifications to which labour markets subject people.

### **III: Education as an Example of Non-Alienated Work**

If neo-liberal education reformers are to be believed, then the primary interest of young people is to allow their life-horizons to be determined by the changing demands of labour markets. Satisfying labour market demand becomes a moral imperative that overrides the openness to the future and freedom from imposed routine that, in propitious social circumstances, generates the feelings of freedom associated with youth. The neo-liberal school speaks the language of goals, opportunities, and self-realization, but defines these value in terms of finding paid employment—and then being “flexible” enough to start all over again when market conditions change. In this way, neo-liberal schooling confuses being a subject with being an object of labour markets—the value of one’s choices is measured by the money-value those choices generate.

Our point is not that students can afford to be non-chalant about their future in a society where basic life-necessities are priced commodities, or that a good life is static, safe, secure, and without new challenges. Our conception of education as the deepening and broadening of the capacity understanding without deference to the ruling value system is hardly a capacity without

practical import or afraid of change. Its essential effect on students is to tenable them to make the changes that must be mad if life is to become more secure in the provision of what free and meaningful lives require. Despite the rhetoric, it is the neo-liberal reformers who affirm the status quo, who bog down thinking in the mire to service to established authorities and reified powers, and who are actually fearful, not only of real change, but also of real work.

As a process in which a given material is transformed in accordance with a conscious, self-determined goal, education is an example of non-alienated labour. Non-alienated labour, for Marx, is labour which takes place free from the compulsion of natural necessity.(1844 Manuscripts) Through it, human capacities are developed for their own sake and the contribution their realization makes to satisfying some life-requirements of others. When educational institutions and students are adequately funded, when the life-values of cognitive and imaginative development govern the organization of the institutions, and when the pedagogical methods are collaborative and interactive, the work of cognitive and imaginative development is non-alienated. Students enjoy a respite from the coercive domination of market forces over their activity, they are free to pursue their own interests subject only to the educational demand that they demonstrate what they take to be true and remain open to the possibility of error and improvement, and they transform themselves by meeting and overcoming the limitations that defined their initial level of understanding. At the same time, not only their own development as individuals, but their willingness and capacity to contribute to social well-being only fully develops when educational activity is experienced as free, uncoerced, non-alienated labour. To illustrate our point we want to share an example of a collaborative project we were involved in with adult learners in Windsor, Ontario.

As teachers of adults in a city that is experiencing the painful fallout of neoliberal policies, especially unemployment as a result of deindustrialization, we looked for a way to break the reproductive processes at work in schooling. Working with adult learners in a local adult education high school, (students who are typically unemployed, often on social assistance, or recent immigrants or refugees) we sought a way to enable them to make sense of the causes of the poverty that dominated their lives. The project began when I was asked me to come and talk to the class about the origins and meaning of neo-liberalism. My talk resonated with the students and spurred them to begin to think differently about their own social situations. Instead of feeling like passive victims, they began to develop their own arguments and criticisms. They began to see that their social situation was not a function of their own individual choices, but of global forces acting locally and affecting their life-horizons. As a consequence, and on their own initiative, they decided to create a booklet that *explained* how neo-liberal policies had led to the situation they were currently in and strategies for changing that situation. Generic capacities cultivated through education *enabled* the students to redescribe their own experience, understand its causes more clearly, and begin to think of themselves as subjects capable of doing something about it. The students decided that they wanted to tell their stories of life under neoliberalism, and to compile these stories into a book. The undertaking and completion of this assignment was itself a process that countered the prevailing hegemony, in that decisions regarding how the stories would be organized, illustrated, bound, categorized, and titled were collectively made, as was the initial decision to write the book for the major assignment. As a class, we decided how the assignment would be marked, creating a rubric collectively.

This project was our way of taking up Girouxs challenge to teachers to “take sides, speak out and engage in the hard pedagogical work of debunking corporate culture’s assault on

teaching and learning, orient their teaching for social change, connect learning to public life” (2012 <http://www.philosophersforchange.org>). Apple similarly urges teachers to undertake “counterhegemonic activities in ... schools and communities ... are made public and that we honestly ask ourselves what our roles are in supporting the struggles toward the long revolution” (p. 231). Heeding their calls and mindful of the assertions of Paulo Freire and popular educator Myles Horton that neutrality in education is not possible (Horton & Freire, 1990), we engaged students with the opportunity to *work* in ways that would explain the force at work in their city and also expose them to the possibility that work need not be alienating and hierarchical, it can freely develop life-valuable creative capacities and be organized democratically. Thus, we did not politicise “education [in a way that] silences in the name of orthodoxy and imposes itself on students while undermining dialogue, deliberation and critical engagement,” ( Giroux, <http://www.philosophersforchange.org> 2012). Instead, we provided the space and time for the students to develop their own critical attitudes towards its effects of their lives. We understood that adult students are not children – they are living on a daily basis in a social order where their wages are falling, their livelihoods are being exported to other countries for socio-economic reasons they did not initially understand – and that their life experiences had a place in the classroom, connecting the curriculum to the actual lives of the students and empowering the students to speak openly about what they know best: their own life experience. As a result, the classroom became a place where this hegemony could be critically examined. As the course progressed, students began to request classes in “how to vote,” more specifically, how to make sense of the differences between parties, how to make sense of election campaigns, and how to critically examine campaign promises. One man asked to stay after school to talk about how he

could “get more involved.” Later that week, he walked to the local workers’ action centre to sign up as a volunteer.

Giroux (2012) calls on teachers to provide “a more inclusive vocabulary for aligning politics and the task of leadership” and to “provide students with the language, knowledge and social relations” to make connections between personal problems, rights and responsibilities, and social issues (<http://www.philosophersforchange.org>). What our experience has taught us is that teaching students the name of the process at work in our city established a basis upon which critical dialogue could take place. The students learned the words “hegemony” and “counter-hegemony,” not only as they pertained to the way we were teaching the course, but also as a way to understand taken-for-granted beliefs. As well, by introducing students to the word “neoliberalism,” we challenged them to make connections in their lives and in the world around them: connections between free trade agreements and unemployment; between tax breaks for the wealthy and their increasing difficulty finding social services to meet their needs. Students who may have been suffering in silence now had a way to understand their situation: why they were unemployed, why they needed a high school diploma to do the jobs their parents did without a high school diploma, or why they were treated with disrespect when seeking social assistance. A student who had been unemployed for a while and had shared with the class the humiliation he experienced applying for welfare, made a comment one day that resonated around the room: “This is making me feel better. It’s good to know I’m not a loser.”

The project we undertook in our adult high school classroom challenged the reduction of education to schooling. In doing so, students discovered the class structures and ruling value systems underlying as social causes the challenges they faced every day in their own lives. Our educational objectives had less to do with employability and more to do with living in this

historical moment. Our concern as teachers was for engaging students in critical reflection to make sense of the world around them so they will feel empowered to find new and innovative responses to an oppressive social order. One man's comment on his experience in the class was most telling: "Finally, I'm learning something in school that I can use to live my life!" That seemed a most appropriate educational objective for a high school curriculum.

This new critical insight was achieved within a school designed almost explicitly to reprogram adults for labour markets. Yet, their own experience, combined with the basic imaginative and cognitive capacities their classes enabled them to develop led them to an investigation of the causes of their situations, which transformed their self-understanding. Formerly, they thought of themselves as objects, whether of bad luck, bad choices, or bad circumstances; subsequently they thought of themselves as individual and collective subjects whose value as human beings demanded social changes. As they became clearer about the causes of their objective situation, these students—often decried as lazy immigrants, as criminal, as addicts, developed a tremendous capacity and appetite for work, just because in their book project they could both "contemplate themselves in a world they had created" (Marx) and feel themselves as capable of making a (small but real) contribution to solving the problems of the community which affected them as individuals.

It might be objected that this exercise achieved no practical result; the problems that the students faced before the class they faced after, the 'real world' was still there and the limited range of opportunities they faced was still limited. They would have been better served by job-specific retraining or apprenticeships that focused on real skills. Aside from the obvious rejoinder that there is no contradiction between becoming educated and skilled, the deeper point that must be made in response is that the objection assimilates the entire value of human life to

being valued as a commodity by a potential employer. This collapse of the difference between the life-value of experience, activity, and interaction and the money-value of skills that you can sell to an employer is precisely the “tyranny of work” under capitalist society. That these students learned to take initiative when they had been told to obey authority their whole lives, when they learned to cooperate when the instinct of many when confronted with a different idea than their own was to fight, and that they *enjoyed*, for the first time in their lives, learning something because they could feel it making a difference in their lives (if not their social circumstances) is all irrelevant to people who purport to be concerned with student well-being.

Moreover, it is obviously not the case that learning to understand society as a field of problems (as opposed to fixed commands to which one must comply), to cooperate with others to understand those problems, to learn to communicate and convince others (and be convinced in turn by them), and to think about concrete solutions that go beyond the established structures of power and ruling value system, are *useless*. *These are the capacities by which human history is developed*. The neo-liberal subordination of education to schooling says, in effect, there was once history to be made, but now that our class has achieved ascendancy, not only must history stop, *no one is to be enabled to understand even that there once was history*. Neo-liberalism conflates agency with acquiescence, student life-requirements with passive compliance with system demands, life-value with the production of money-value for the delectation of the appropriating class, and the “real-world” with the circuits of labour and commodity markets. What is on offer with neo-liberal educational reforms is not, therefore, education for the real-world, but the attempt to permanently impede people- save for the select few chosen to rule— from understanding reality.



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